



A Man Who Stood Up For What Was Right

1 Kings 17 & 18

It's hard to stand up for right. I like this man. Some people criticize him because he got discouraged. Yet, Elijah remains one of the most remarkable figures of history. The New Testament talks about him more than any other Old Testament prophet.

He appeared suddenly on the scene as the crisis prophet, with thunder on his brow and tempest in his voice. He disappeared just as suddenly, as he was swept skyward in a chariot of fire. Between his first appearance and his final disappearance lay a succession of amazing miracles. People noticed Elijah. We shall notice three things about him: his *character*, his *ministry*, his *significance*.

First, his character. Even those critics of the Bible, who have disputed Elijah's miracles, have allowed the greatness of his character. Good Leaders, always have good character. It is shocking to hear people say, "We're not electing a new minister –we are electing a new "Whatever." Again, I will say, "Good Leaders, always have good character." He seems to have been somewhat remarkable, even physically. He was a man of the open country. Elijah loved the haunts of the hills and valleys; he roamed the broad, unsettled pasturage of Bashan. His rugged appearance would have been such as to have attracted the eye of the softer-clad townsman. When we read of Elijah confronting Ahab, as he announced the coming of a drought, we picture a bearded, long-haired, weather-tanned mountain man, dressed in sheep skin, breaking into the king's presence, arms lifted to heaven, as he denounced the weak-willed king in tones sounding like awesome echoes from the mountains.

If anyone knew about nature, it was Elijah. I can hear him say, "You don't know a eucalyptus tree from a Lombardy poplar, and here you are claiming to worship nature."

But Elijah was no less striking in his moral character. I keep hearing, "We expect too much of our heroes; they're human too." I resent having to hear that. Is it too much to expect that our hero does not murder his former wife? Is it too much to expect that our hero will not rape a woman in a hotel? Is it really too much to expect that our hero will not sexually abuse children? Is it too much to expect that our hero will not have sexual relations with 100 different women? Is it too much to expect that our heroes will not put a reward on the opposing quarterback's head to get him off the field in a stretcher and into the hospital? No, it's not too much to expect! Stop making excuses for these people! We're sad and disappointed; we have a perfect right to feel so. Character must be expected. If you are going to be my leader, you cannot be a profane person --and expect me to call you good.

Three qualities were especially prominent in Elijah's character --courage, faith, and zeal. See his courage; here is the Martin Luther of old-time Israel, nailing up his own version of the 95 thesis to the door of the

palace. He single-handedly challenged the entire priesthood of the state religion to a decisive test on Mount Carmel.

See his faith; hear him say to Ahab, "There shall not be rain or dew these years, but according to my word!" Dew and rain may be withheld through ordinary natural causes for days, or even weeks, or in rare occasions, for months; but for dew and rain to be suspended for years, as Elijah declared, must involve supernatural intervention. For such an intervention, Elijah had prayed; and he believed that God would certainly answer. It is this dauntless faith that shines out through the entire record.

Then, see Elijah's zeal. In a cave on Mount Horeb, he said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts." The honor of God was at stake! And so, begins Elijah's public ministry --there is a burning intensity about his godliness. As the drought dragged on, there is a price upon Elijah's head; he was sustained by ravens who brought him food at the brook Cherith, and by a widow woman at Zarephath. That is 1 Kings, chapter 17.

In Chapter 18, we have Elijah's ministry. There are two sorts of prophets --prophets of words, and prophets of deeds. Elijah was, doubtless, a prophet of deeds. We think of Isaiah when we think of words; we think of Elijah when we think of deeds. So far as we know, he wrote nothing. This does not surprise us, such people as Elijah seldom go with patient penmanship. Many of the most passionate and energetic reformers have been altogether ungifted as writers. They were people of action rather than diction. They were dynamic rather than academic. They may not have perpetuated their names in books to be handed to succeeding generations; however, they do live on in the abiding results of the work which they accomplished for the betterment of their fellows.

That is not to say that the zeal of such folk may not run wild, for it may. It is always the better part of wisdom to connect zeal with solid direction. Since Elijah had the special call of a prophet that was no problem; God had a special guidance for prophets, that does not come to the rest of us. We are not prophets. So, in our own day, when there are no more prophets, zeal must be harnessed with caution. For example the zeal of Dwight Moody, who was a shoe salesman in Chicago, was harnessed with the direction of Reuben A. Torrey, who was a *Yale Divinity School* theologian.

Once again, Elijah's ministry was one of reformation. He originated nothing new. Elijah simply called people back to the old way; he did not call them to something new. There is often great need for people who will stand by to ask, "Where do you think you're going?" Perhaps this is negative. I know that we are quite sufficiently negative without fanning our urge to be so; yet, try as I may, I have never adequately discovered how to raise children without eventually saying, "Don't do that, and I really mean it." Though we, too often, forget the positive, that does not mean we can eradicate the negative. There is a place for both the negative and the positive. There is a place for slum-clearance as well as new-villa building. There is a place for refuting error as well as for proclaiming truth.

What was Elijah's Significance? What was his permanent significance? How do the character and ministry of this extraordinary person speak to the people of God today?

First, Elijah is a demonstration of that truth, that God always has a person to match the hour. The first king of the divided kingdom, Jeroboam, put a golden calf at Dan in the north, and another at Bethel in the south. He said they were to be representations of the invisible God for the people to worship. He explained, "It's too far to go to Jerusalem --too much trouble."

Here is the rest of the story. After Jeroboam's death, about 40 years passed and Ahab came to the throne. In that 40 years, there had been a continual moral/religious deterioration. Things were dark enough when Ahab began his reign, but he made them 100 times worse. The Bible says, "He did evil above all that were before him." His wife, Jezebel, was a handsome, shrewd, and intriguing woman, who worked her will through the evil-hearted, weak-willed Ahab. The two of them grimly determined to stamp out the worship of God. The altars of God were cast down, and prophets were killed. Licentious modes of worship were introduced. Temples were built to the Sun god, Baal. It seemed as though the worship of God could never regain its honor.

And so, it is as Bishop Hall said, "The greatest prophet is reserved for the worst age." When the lights of Christendom get so low as to seem to be at the point of going out, God has a Martin Luther, a Roger Williams, or a John Wesley up his sleeve.

Secondly, when wickedness develops into extraordinary proportions, God meets it with extraordinary measures. The true God will show his superiority over the nature worship of the Phoenicians by suspending rain for three and a half years.

Over and against the superstitions and fake miracles of a false religion, God would now intervene with a special succession of real miracles with which he would validate and vindicate the true faith. This is why the ministry of Elijah was one of miracles. God was, here, meeting an extraordinary situation with extraordinary measures. Sometimes it is only through difficult circumstances and drought conditions that people will turn the corner and head back toward God. I believe that in the latter days of earth's history, when extraordinary situations occur, we may expect God, once again, to meet the challenge by extraordinary measures. He will get the attention of people.

Elijah was a man with enough sound judgment to know that physical suffering and hardship is a far smaller calamity than the ugliness of ungodliness and moral failure. Even a long drought, despite the physical hardship it might bring, would be a kindness if it brought the people back to God, saving their souls and purifying their hearts. Hearts that are up to no good, do no good. There are things worse than hardships.

Elijah could draw a boundary line. There are many people who do no decisive good because they cannot draw a boundary line. Such people would have pleaded with Elijah not to pray for the drought; they would have recoiled with fear at the thought of Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal. "Oh," they would have said, "These prophets of Baal have imported crystal in their homes; they wear nice clothes, let's not get them upset." These are the folk who might have advised Harriet Beecher Stowe to, "Let slavery be; don't stir things up with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; after all, some of the slaveholders love their slaves." Today, these are the same people who would like to re-write history to teach "How slavery was so beneficial to African

Americans." Let the cancer kill its victim rather than use the knife of the surgeon. Better to, "Let the disease run its course," than to take bitter medicine. That is what these folk say.

May we not expect that God will meet the need of our own day by some extraordinary means? I think we may. Some of God's people sigh and tell us, "Oh, there's no use in praying for a renewal today. No awakening is predicted in Scripture for the end of time." What kind of idea is that? Where in the Bible do we read about Tyndale, Wesley, Roger Williams, Dwight Moody, or Billy Graham? Yet, these brought renewal to the church and were gratefully chronicled in the newspapers of their times, and the current events of our own day. They brought renewal to the church. They brought renewal to the church world-wide.

What is more, where is there any place in Scripture that might lead us to believe that God has finished his work? It is never too late to have a revival within me. May we who live now, pray for the people of our own day --our own people. The story of the plain clad prophet should prod the consciences of us all. We ought to, in all earnestness and seriousness, pray for our own generation. In these days in which we, also, have moved from the faith of our fathers and mothers, there comes a new and fresh call down through the centuries from this old time prophet. "If God be God, then serve him."

We believe that in our day of Christian, New Testament teaching, this can only be done by trusting, serving, following, and copying God's Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one; he that denies me denies the Father who sent me."

There is an example for all of us in Jesus Christ. Do you want to stand up for what's right? Then you want to stand up for Jesus Christ; he was right about everything. When you disagree with Him, you're wrong. **When you disagree with Jesus, you are wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong.**